

Saunderson and the Dynamite

Louis Becke

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Saunderson was one of those men who firmly believed that he knew everything, and exasperated people by telling them how to do things; and Denison, the super-cargo of the Palestine, hated him most fervently for the continual trouble he was giving to everyone, and also because he had brought a harmonium on board, and played dismal tunes on it every night and all day on Sundays. But, as Saunderson was one of the partners in the firm who owned the Palestine, Denison, and Pakenham the skipper, had to suffer him in silence, and trust that something might happen to him before long. What irritated Denison more than anything else was that Saunderson frequently expressed the opinion that super-cargoes were superfluous luxuries to owners, and that such work as they tried to do could well be done by the captains, provided the latter were intelligent men !

"Never mind, Tom," said Pakenham hopefully, one day, "he's a big eater, and is bound to get the fever if we give him a fair show in the Solomons. Then we can dump him ashore at some missionary's—he and his infernal groan-box—and go back to Sydney without the beast."

When the Palestine arrived at Leone Bay, in Tutuila, Saunderson dressed himself beautifully and went ashore to the mission-house, and in the evening Mrs. O— (the missionary's wife) wrote Denison a note and asked if he could spare a cheese from the ship's stores, and added a P.S., "What a terrible bore he is!" This made the captain and himself feel better.

The next morning Saunderson came on board. Denison was in the cabin, showing a trader named Rigby some samples of dynamite; the trader wanted a case or two of the dangerous compound to blow a boat passage through the reef opposite his house, and Denison was telling him how to use it. Of course Saunderson must interfere, and said he would show Rigby what to do. He had never fired a charge of dynamite in his life, nor even seen one fired or a cartridge prepared, but had listened carefully to Denison. Then he sarcastically told Denison that the cheese he had sent Mrs. O— might have passed for dynamite, it was so dry and tasteless.

"Well, dynamite is made from cheese, you know," said the supercargo deferentially, "just cheese slightly impregnated with picric acid, gastrito-nepenthe, and cubes of oxalicogene."

Saunderson said he knew that, and after telling Rigby that he would walk over to his station before dinner, and show him where to begin operations on the reef, went on shore again.

About twelve o'clock Denison and Rigby went on shore to test the dynamite, fuse, and caps—first in the water, and then on the reef. Just abreast of the mission-house they saw a big school of grey mullet swimming close in to the beach, and Denison quickly picked up a stone, tied it with some string round a cartridge, cut the fuse very short, lit it, and threw it in. There was a short fizz, then a dull, heavy thud, and up came hundreds of the beautiful fish stunned or dead. Saunderson came out of the mission-house and watched the natives collecting them. Denison had half-a-dozen cartridges in his hand; each one was tightly enveloped in many thicknesses of paper, seized round with twine, and had about six inches of fuse, with the ends carefully frayed out so as to light easily.

"Give me some of those," said Saunderson.

The supercargo reluctantly handed him two, and Saunderson remarked that they were very clumsily covered, but he would fix some more himself "properly" another time. Denison sulkily observed that he had no time to waste in making dynamite cartridges look pretty. Then, as Saunderson walked off, he called out and told him that if he was going to shoot fish he would want to put a good heavy stone on the cartridges. Saunderson said when he wanted advice from any one he would ask for it. Then he sent word by a native to Mrs. O— that he would send her along some fish in a few minutes.

Now within a few hundred yards of the mission-house there was a jetty, and at the end of the jetty was Her Majesty's gunboat Badger, a small schooner-rigged wooden vessel commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Muddle, one of the most irascible men that ever breathed, and who had sat on more Consuls than any one else in

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the service.

Saunderson went on the jetty followed by a crowd of natives, and looked over into the water. There were swarms of fish, just waiting to be dynamited. He told a native to bring him a stone, and one was brought—a nice round, heavy stone as smooth as a billiard ball just the very wrong kind of stone. He tied it on the cartridge at last, after it had fallen off four or five times; then, as he did not smoke, and carried no matches, he lit it from a native woman's cigarette, and let it drop into the water. The stone promptly fell off, but the cartridge floated gaily, and drifted along fizzing in a contented sort of way. Saunderson put his hands on his hips, and watched it nonchalantly, oblivious of the fact that all the natives had bolted back to the shore to be out of danger, and watch things.

There was a bit of a current, and the cartridge was carried along till it brought up gently against the Badger—just in a nice cosy place between the rudder bearding and the stern-post. Then it went off with a bang that shook the universe, and ripped off forty-two sheets of copper from the Badger; and Saunderson fell off the jetty into the water; and the bluejackets who were below came tumbling up on deck; and the gunner, seeing Lieutenant-Commander Muddle rush up from his cabin in his shirt-sleeves with a razor in his hand, thought that he had gone queer again in his head, and had tried to blow up the ship, and was going to cut his throat, and so he rushed at him, and knocked him down and took his razor away, and begged him to be quiet; and Muddle, thinking it was a mutiny, nearly went into a fit, and struggled so desperately, and made such awful choking noises that two more men sat on him; and the navigating midshipman, thinking it was a fire, told the bugler to sound quarters, and then, seeing the captain being held down by three men, rushed to his assistance, but tripped over something or somebody and fell down and nearly broke his nose; and all the time Saunderson, who was clinging to one of the jetty piles, was yelling pitifully for help, being horribly afraid of sharks.

At last he was fished out by Rigby and some natives and carried up to the mission-house and then, when he was able to talk coherently, he sent for Denison, who told him that Commander Muddle was coming for him presently with a lot of armed men and a boatswain with a green bag in which was a "cat", and that he (Saunderson) would first be flogged and then hanged at the Badger's yard-arm, and otherwise treated severely, for an attempt to blow up one of Her Majesty's ships; and then Saunderson shivered all over, and staggered out of the mission-house in a suit of Mr. O—'s pyjamas, much too large for him, and met Commander Muddle on the jetty and tried to explain how it occurred, and Muddle called him an infernal, drivelling idiot, and knocked him clean off the jetty into the water again, and used awful language, and told Denison that his chronometers were ruined, and the ship's timbers started, and that he had had a narrow escape from cutting his own throat when the dynamite went off, as he had just begun to shave.

Saunderson was very ill after that, and was in such mortal terror that Muddle and every one else on board the gunboat meant to kill, wound, or seriously damage him, that he kept inside the mission-house, and said he felt he was dying, and that Mr. O— would prepare him for the end. So Denison and Pakenham, who were now quite cheerful again, sent his traps and his harmonium ashore, and sailed without him, a great peace in their bosoms.